

Leading Public Schools in an Oligarchial Age

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Contemporary educational leaders should realize that our political system of governance is not particularly democratic in the sense that the people rule. While popular elections occur in the U.S., participation rates by citizens are notoriously low, particularly at the local level. This is a striking rebuke to our founders' notion that the most popular forms of democracy would be at the local level. By contrast, the elections that generate the largest voter turnout are those for the president. But these are not democratic elections, since the Electoral College makes the final determination as to who is actually selected as President of the United States. This decision can contradict the total popular vote, which was the case in 2000/2001, when George W. Bush carried the Electoral College while Al Gore won the popular vote. We have never directly elected the U.S. President, which makes our claim to "democracy" all the more curious.

Furthermore, with the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*) allowing corporations to have the same speech rights as citizens, the door has been flung wide-open to permit corporations to reshape the political landscape at election time. Corporations are now free to fund advertisements that support or oppose a given political candidate (the ban on direct corporate funding of candidates remains intact at this writing). That said, this controversial ruling *is* consistent with court decisions going back to the late 18th century that grant corporations the same Constitutional rights as U.S. citizens. Consequently, during the first 60 years of the 14th Amendment's existence, the vast majority of Supreme Court decisions involved the protections of corporations—not African Americans, for whom the amendment was intended.

The power of corporate citizenship is also underscored by the political response to the current economic downturn. While millions of ordinary Americans remain unemployed in numbers not seen since the Great Depression of the last century, multiple U.S. national governments—both Republican and Democratic—have come to the rescue of the financial sector (first) and then the industrial sector (see General Motors and Chrysler). The comparatively meager aid that has been dribbled out to the unemployed (see human beings) has been hotly contested and subjected to on-going votes by the U.S. House and Senate, with the unemployed portrayed as increasingly undeserving of such federal largess. In very practical terms, the U.S. is less of a democratic republic than an international confederation of corporate oligarchs, with the thinnest democratic window treatments.

For educational leaders seeking to lead public schools, they must understand the profoundly anti-democratic structures that shape their work environments. In the U.S., the needs of business and industry take political precedence over the needs of children. In the current economic downturn, public school districts are witnessing historic employee layoffs, with teachers, administrators, nurses, and other school employees viewed as fiscal leeches on the public purse. Meanwhile, taxes are cut for the wealthy elite in the name of spurring economic growth. That increased unemployment bodes ill for long-term financial stability of states and local municipalities escapes the political calculation since public employees—including public school administrators—aren't viewed as "real workers."

Furthermore, when the needs of children are raised in the political sphere they are framed in terms of "economic competitiveness." These political framings displace children's welfare concerns with those of corporations. Hence, since the 1980s, the vast majority of the efforts to reform public schools have focused on improving student academic outcomes to improve national economic competitiveness—an issue near and dear to corporate hearts. The reform efforts have nothing to do with the actual lives of children. That approximately 19% of all U.S. children continue to live in poverty escapes mention, although family SES remains the strongest predictor of student academic achievement. But the corporate oligarchs and their political representatives are not interested in redistributing income to soften the pathologies of free market capitalism and, in turn, boost the academic achievement of all U.S. children. Instead, it keeps the political focus on the public school claiming that reforming public education will solve our all of social problems—including poverty. Meanwhile, we have 100 years of voluminous evidence to the contrary: To deal with poverty, you must directly address the causes of poverty—but that would mean our tax structure would change quite dramatically (see Anyon, 2005), something that corporations will not allow.

Additionally, the real educational needs of students for personal autonomy, intellectual curiosity, and political self-determination have been subsumed in favor "academic achievement" as measured by corporate-designed standardized test. So less reflective administrators insist that teachers prepare for public

school students the state assessment by insisting that teachers teach to the test—a de-skilling exercise for teachers and a mind-numbing experience for students. These leaders do so because the professional consequences of school failure are increasingly stark.

But there are better ways to lead. The more reflective, social justice-minded leaders need to navigate around these demands by corporate oligarchs and devise strategies that appear facially compliant with the legal and policy demands, while securing real educative spaces within their buildings. What I am asking educational leaders to do is to engage in political subversion.

There is a tradition of political subversion found in the history of African American principals working in segregated public schools. During the 1940s–early 1960s, black principals worked to educate African American children to see and think beyond the limits of Jim Crow. But these leaders also worked to attack the foundations of this caste-system by running voter registration drives (including getting their own employees registered), and collecting data on the sly for the NAACP to be used in litigation. For the inattentive, educational administrators like J. Ruport Picott and H. Council Trenholm appeared to be rather innocuous leaders. But they were anything but.

Similarly, contemporary educational leaders need to see the constraints imposed by our political economy and then work to subvert them. If educational leaders are committed to a more democratic and just U.S., they need to create such spaces within their own schools.

About the Author

Catherine Lugg is a professor of education in the Department of Theory, Policy and Administration, Graduate School of Education, at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Her research interests include educational politics and history, and the influences of social movements and political ideology have on educational politics and policy. Her research has appeared in *Educational Policy*, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, the *Journal of School Leadership*, the *Journal of Educational Administration*, the *Journal of Curriculum and Practice*, the *American Journal of Semiotics*, *Pennsylvania History*, and *Education and Urban Society*. She is also the author of two books, *For God & Country: Conservatism and American School Policy* (Peter Lang), and *Kitsch: From Education to Public Policy* (Falmer). Dr. Lugg also maintains the blog *Thinking Queerly: Schools, politics and culture*. She may be reached via e-mail at: catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu